



PRIORITIZING PROSECUTIONS IN SCHOOLS (PPS)



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I. Overview

School shootings in recent years in Colorado and other states have kept the focus of the media on violence in schools. In Dakota County, the Columbine tragedy was followed by a rash of bomb threats directed toward schools. Despite all the media attention each time one of these incidents happens, it must be kept in mind that schools remain one of the safest locations for children to be day in and day out. Many more children are injured or killed, both accidentally and intentionally, in their homes than they are at schools. However, the concerns about violence and crime in our schools must not be overlooked.

Schools must remain safe places for learning, for socializing and growing up happy and healthy. We are fortunate to have outstanding and dedicated teachers working throughout Dakota County to educate our youth each year and we must never forget that the vast majority of students are law abiding and problem free. However, students cannot learn and teachers cannot teach effectively in an environment where there is ongoing concern about safety and violence. In response to increasing violence and incidents of assault and threats in schools, many school districts, both nationwide and locally, have appropriately adopted stricter policies concerning weapons or violence in schools. Many law enforcement agencies have joined with schools in an effort to reduce violence and its effects on the school environment. The outstanding school liaison officers who work with many schools in Dakota County are one example of these collaboration efforts. Liaison officers are involved in crime prevention in schools, as well as quick investigation and apprehension of the offender after an incident has occurred.

The Dakota County Attorney's Office is instituting the Prioritizing Prosecutions in Schools program (PPS) to take this effort another step. PPS will speed up the response to crimes that occur on school property or on school buses. It is designed to get juveniles who commit such crimes into court or an appropriate diversion program faster, so that they can be held accountable for their behaviors and choices more quickly and with more impact.



Prioritizing Prosecutions In Schools (PPS)

The Dakota County Attorney's Office is responsible for the prosecution of all juvenile crimes occurring in the County. In 2000, the County Attorney's Office initiated actions against over 3,800 juveniles based on referrals from various law enforcement agencies. Of that number, 1,843 were prosecuted for felonies, gross misdemeanors and misdemeanors, including some petty or status offenses. Almost 2,000 (mostly first-time offenders) were diverted into programs to confront them with and help them learn about the consequences of their negative behaviors in a positive way. The vast majority of these 3,800 plus offenders are middle school, junior high, or senior high students in Dakota County schools. Many of these offenses took place on school property or on school buses. PPS will ensure a more timely and effective response to those offenses.

The Dakota County Attorney's Office, through the PPS program, will target all violations of the law that occur on school grounds or school buses. Prosecutors will continue to aggressively prosecute serious felony-level juvenile crimes, including assaults, terroristic threats, weapons-related offenses, and drug crimes, but the program will also focus on misdemeanor offenses, such as assault in the 5th degree, disorderly conduct, theft, damage to property, and alcohol possession or usage. Our goal is to prosecute all school-related offenses faster, thereby subjecting these youth to more meaningful sanctions, since they will be imposed closer to the time of the offense. Our goals are to insure that offenders know that accountability for their behavior will be swift and sure and that schools remain a safe environment for students and teachers alike.

II. A Two-Part Strategy

A. Priority Processing

The Dakota County Attorney's Office Juvenile and Protective Services Division handles all juvenile prosecutions within Dakota County. This Division will now process and handle all school-related crimes on a priority basis. Juveniles arrested by law enforcement for felony offenses and detained at the Juvenile Services Center must be charged within 36 hours under current law. All school-related offenses, whether they are felony level or not, and whether they result in detention at the Juvenile Services Center or not, will be handled as if there were an arrest. All chargeable cases will be reviewed, charged, and filed with the court within 36 hours of receipt in the County Attorney's Office. (The only exception would be in a case where further investigation by law enforcement is necessary before charging can occur.) Law enforcement officers will be advised to flag the referral as a "school crime" on the front of the referral for priority processing. The County Attorney's Office will work with law enforcement officers and school liaison officers to help speed up their referral of school-related offenses for prosecution. The County Attorney's Office will also be working with the courts to seek expedited court dates for school-related offenses. Those juveniles whose offenses and history qualify them for diversion will also receive expedited diversion dates. The Dakota County Attorney's Office has always aggressively prosecuted serious offenses in schools, such as felony assaults and weapons violations. This will continue and appropriate consequences will be sought for these offenses, including detention when necessary.



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B. Partnerships Among Prosecutors, Law Enforcement and Schools

Each middle school, junior high school, and senior high school in Dakota County, including alternative schools, will have a prosecutor assigned to that school. The attorney will meet with the school liaison and school officials at least once during each school year, and be available throughout the school year for other meetings as needed for ongoing advice and consultation about legal issues relating to juveniles and school-related crime. Additionally, the attorney will be available to participate in training of school personnel as requested, and as a resource for teachers and staff. The County Attorney's Office will conduct training for school liaison officers to make sure they are aware of new developments in the law as they pertain to juvenile law enforcement and school-related crimes. The Dakota County Attorney will also work with school and police officials on policies or legislative initiatives to improve information sharing, and any other legal or public policy changes needed for better school-related crime prevention or prosecution. We also plan to institute a better system for tracking school-related offenses within our County. An annual report of school-related crimes will be provided to each Dakota County school district.

The Dakota County Attorney's Office looks forward to working with and being a resource for all schools and school districts within Dakota County.

For more information about the Prioritizing Prosecutions in Schools program (PPS), contact Don Bruce, Juvenile and Protective Services Division Head, Dakota County Attorney's Office, at 651-438-4438 (or e-mail at: don.bruce@co.dakota.mn.us).

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